Book review: Up Close and Personal

Paul Gamble, Merlin Stone and Neil Woodruff

Kogan Page, 1999; ISBN: 0749430877; 288pp; hardback; £24.95

When I was asked to review 'Up Close and Personal' I thought I was about to be treated to a trip to the movies. Instead, Gamble *et al.*'s book was delivered by the Royal Mail. Another time, perhaps.

The title of the book describes the content pretty well. 'Up Close and Personal? Customer Relationship Marketing @ Work'. The concept of getting personal with customers is certainly what the book focuses on and the issue of relationship marketing (RM) provides a reasonable integrating framework for the many topics presented by the writers. I return to RM later because I think this aspect could be explored in greater depth and breadth. The '@ work' suffix is perhaps a bit of a giveaway, because the book tends to focus on the company end of RM rather than on customer roles and reactions to RM.

Overall I feel this is a serious book on RM. Serious can sometimes mean boring and staid, but not here because the book is eminently readable. One of the major strengths of the writers is their enviable track record of access to a vast range of companies' experiences of direct interaction with, and management of, their customers. The manifestation of this is a wealth of company-based case material producing transferable lessons in a lively way. Indeed, the reporting of a

great variety of dimensions of RM provides a very useful summary of best — and not so best — practice. We can all learn from this.

I do, however, confess to being confused over the integration of the many strands: customer orientation; understanding and knowledge; database marketing; relationships; and loyalty. Should the synthesis of all this be called relationship marketing, or interactive marketing or what? The hype surrounding relationship marketing, will I think, soon turn to an equally rapid decline. But, whatever we call it, the synthesis manifested in this book is certainly of importance to all marketers (whether they recognise themselves as being at the 'transactional' or 'relationship' end of the continuum).

Gamble *et al.* also provide some underpinning for their propositions from marketing and other theory, but, I suspect, not as much as some academics would prefer. Having said this, the book is presumably aimed at the practitioner market rather than purporting to be a mainstream academic textbook. In this context I applaud the writers for not distilling their mountain of information and knowledge down to a series of checklists and 'grids'. There are some of these, mostly relevant and helpful ones, but there is a tendency for consultants to provide over-simplified and therefore

rather glib summaries — training programmes in short. Although these are often well received they do not always do justice to what are usually far more complex issues.

As far as writing style is concerned, the reader will detect different styles. For example, there is a checklist style at times and this contrasts with more of a narrative elsewhere. This is a minor issue and perhaps it will be addressed in the second edition.

So, overall, I welcome this book. It is in my opinion the most solid practitioner RM text so far produced. Having said this, I have two problems with it, both betraying my academic background. First, although there is more of a literature review and transfer of concepts from the academic journals than is usually the case with the overtly practitioner-type text, this book only goes so far. It does not draw from articles from the likes of, for example, Buttle, O'Malley, Tynan or from the more recent writings of Hakansson, Gronroos, Gummesson and David Ford for business markets. This is a pity because there have been significant developments in RM (especially from the customer perspective) during the late 1990s but the referencing is orientated toward the early and mid-1990s and earlier. I also feel that the orientation is perhaps overly economics-based rather than from the behavioural sciences, this means there is more 'company' than 'customer' focus. Whereas there *is* coverage of buyer behaviour concepts, in relative terms this lacks both depth and breadth. If we really are to develop relationships with customers we need to understand them in terms that are more effective than the mechanistic behavioural metrics of database, RFM

and LTV analysis. Related areas, that I accept (like the above) *are* covered, but which could have been treated more fully, revolve around privacy and the resulting legal and professional restraints on practice. These are crucial to successful mutual relationships and might be more significant in the long term than company-based perspectives and systems. The issue of deselecting customers and marketing's wider social responsibilities beyond the current strategic plan or tactical campaign could be explored further, for example. As is always the case, however, reviews are as much about the reviewer as the reviewed.

My second beef is that the book probably works well on a 'dipping into' basis. Trying to read it from cover to cover is full of annoying leaps from topic to topic and at times, back again. Actually, this might be an irrelevant point because how many managers have the time to read a book like this from start to finish? They are more likely to dip into the section that is currently relevant to them. In this sense, therefore, having coverage of related issues is an advantage, even if it appears rather disjointed to the more linear reader.

Although I think I would have preferred to have been treated to the film, as far as work-related books go, 'Up Close' is pretty good and I really do recommend it to everyone, not only in direct/relationship marketing but in all areas of marketing and, although it is not especially aimed at the academic market, I will certainly be putting it on the reading list for my students.

Martin Evans
Editorial Board